

THE MINISTER'S SON

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THE MINISTER'S SON



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A RECORD OF HIS ACHIEVEMENTS

By

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To WOODROW WILSON
Son of a Presbyterian Minister
Spokesman for the Soul of America



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A FEW summers ago, engaged in historical research in the Shenandoah Valley, that star-lit and mountain-walled abbey of the Confederacy, I went to call at the home of the venerable Dr. Graham, pastor emeritus of the Presbyterian Church at Winchester, Virginia. It was in his home that "Stonewall" Jackson lived when stationed in the Shenandoah Valley. I remember him saying of Jackson that before all else he was a Christian. That was the first business of his life; after that, a soldier. I spent an interesting hour with that delightful old man as he made mention of leading personalities before, since, and at the time of the Civil War. When he learned that I had studied at Princeton, he spoke of Woodrow Wilson, then being mentioned as a candidate for the Governorship of New Jersey. He had known his father, the Reverend Joseph R. Wilson, D. D., intimately, and to his memory he paid this tribute: "Take him all in all, of all the good and great men I have known in my long life, he was the best."

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The son of that Presbyterian minister was, on the 4th of March, inaugurated for the second time as President of the United States, having been re-elected to that office by the most remarkable popular approval ever given to any candidate, and that in spite of a campaign of vituperation and abuse unprecedented in the history of the nation.

The elevation of ministers' sons to the high office of the Presidency brings up that old libel about the character of minister's sons. Are these men striking exceptions? Are ministers' sons as a rule sons of Belial, belonging to the low order of Hophni and Phineas? Charles Lamb wrote a number of essays on popular fallacies. Among the fallacies which he exposed are the following: "That a bully is always a coward"; "that you must love me and love my dog"; "that we should rise with the lark and lie down with the lamb"; "that ill-gotten gains never prosper," and "that enough is as good as a feast." We could wish that he had added one more—that ministers' sons are generally scoundrels. A long time ago Thomas Fuller wrote: "There goeth forth a common report, no less uncharitable than untrue, as if clergymen's sons were generally unfortunate like the sons of Eli, dissolute in their lives and

doleful in their deaths." He goes on to make due allowance for "Benjamins" among the sons of ministers, that is, sons of their old age, and hence, "cockered" and humored by their ancient sires. But his conclusion is that "clergymen's children have not been more unfortunate, but more observed than the children of the parents of other professions." This last observation, coupled with a possible desire to disparage the ministry, is the sole basis for a gross fallacy, as contrary to reason as it is contrary to fact. We can all think of ministers' sons who were scallawags, no credit to a minister or to any other man. But if the general moral and intellectual standard of ministers' sons is not high, then all principles of heredity, education and environment are overthrown. Adam begat a son in his own likeness, and most ministers do the same.

There are, indeed, exceptions both as to the minister's home and as to the minister's son. There are ministers' homes which are not calculated to produce God-fearing or useful men and women. I read recently of a minister's home where the father and mother engaged daily in violent altercations, where every room was impregnated with the smoke of cigarettes, and where a family altar was as unknown as

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in the hut of a Hottentot. When I thought of that and contrasted it with what I had seen in my own home, what many of you saw in your homes, a godly father and godly mother, working and praying together for their Lord and their children, where no word of temper and no act of violence was ever heard or seen, and where the Christian life was not only taught out of Psalm book and catechism, and Bible and commentary, but was itself drawn out in living and unforgettable characters of beauty and power which still shine as stars in heaven to comfort, guide and cheer us on our way—when I thought of that I said to myself, “Good God! how terrible!”

There are sad and terrible exceptions, too, as to the sons of the minister. Many a noble man of God who has walked humbly with his God, like Samuel has had to drink the bitter cup of disappointment in sons who dishonored man and God, and many a broken-hearted father has gone into his chamber over the gate and has uttered that bitter cry of David, “O, Absalom, my son, my son! My son, my son, Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O, Absalom, my son, my son!” But, thank God, both the kind of home I have just pictured and the sons I have just described are

rare, though striking, exceptions. Most sons of ministers, however worthy or unworthy of their fathers, think of those fathers as men who served God here upon earth and who still serve him yonder. They would say of them as Matthew Arnold said of his minister-father:

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"Oh, strong soul, by what shore
Tarriest thou now? For that force
Surely, has not been left vain!
Somewhere, surely, afar
In the sounding labor-house vast
Of being, is practised that strength,
Zealous, beneficent, firm!
Yes, in some far shining sphere,
Conscious or not of the past,
Still thou performest the word
Of the Spirit in whom thou dost live—
Prompt, unwearied, as here."

Albert, the son of a minister, was intensely afraid of thunder. One summer afternoon he wandered away from the house and was caught in a severe electric storm. His father saw him running towards the house with a terrified expression on his face and his lips in noticeable movement. "What were you saying, Albert?" asked his father. "I was reminding God that I am a minister's son," was the breathless reply. We waive the question of

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divine favor, but the facts are at hand to demonstrate that human society at least has shown great favor to the sons of ministers. The clerical family has ever been one of the chief glories of Protestantism. We have no thought of opening an old discussion concerning the differing opinions of two great branches of the Christian Church. It may be that the voluntary celibate may rise to a higher plane of sacrifice and devotion than the minister with a family. There have been eminent Protestants who have renounced the right of marriage. Among them we find such names as Archbishop Leighton, Samuel Hopkins, William Muhlenberg, author of "I would not live alway," and the historian Neander. Suffice it to say that the reformers cannot have been unmindful of the example of patriarchs, priests and prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament. Peter was married, at least he had a mother-in-law, and Paul claimed the right to do as Peter had done. With this ancient precedent and sanction, the reformers cannot have been much troubled in conscience when they departed from the rule of one man, Hildebrand, and took to themselves wives. Luther must have had more serious reasons for renouncing the state

of celibacy than those which he himself gives, viz., to please his father, tease the Pope and vex the devil. At all events, his home life was bright and happy, an earnest and a type of the clerical family which he did so much to found. His letters to his children are models of what a father's letters to his children ought to be. Calvin was perhaps more discreet in his marriage than Luther. He may have been thinking of the sneer of Erasmus. "Some speak of the Lutheran cause as a tragedy, but to me it appears rather as a comedy, for it always ends in a wedding." When Calvin married a demure widow of Strassburg he could still make his boast that he had not assailed Rome as the Greeks assailed Troy, for the sake of a woman. That these early reformers succeeded in harmonizing the life of the priesthood with the life of the family has been for the glory of the Church and the untold enrichment of civilization.

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In the chapter on Luther, Dr. Ernest Richard, in his "History of German Civilization," says: "By his marriage he simply did himself what he had preached to others for a long time. He maintained that the family was the foundation of social life, and by marrying himself he removed the stain put on

woman and the family by the law of celibacy, giving again this recognition to woman's position which the Germanic peoples claim with such pride and affection as peculiar to themselves from the beginning, and which their Roman neighbors do not seem to be able to appreciate. But no matter how much they may privately sneer at it, or publicly ridicule it, the Germans know that this private life, which spreads its light within the four walls of the home, is one of the deep roots of their national strength. As far as Protestant countries are concerned, and especially Protestant Germany, this abolition of celibacy and the emphasizing of the importance and sacredness of the family life on the part of the clergymen has not only had a general ethical effect, but has strengthened the forces that make for higher culture in a way that is often overlooked. In the atmosphere of the Protestant parsonage, with its high idealism, in spite of occasional bigotry, pedantry and phariseeism, with its sense of duty based on self-repect, its intellectual refinements, its material unpretentiousness, in short, with that whole spiritual inheritance of Luther and his companions, the sons and daughters of the parsons grow up and their importance in the culture-develop-

ment of the nation can be easily appreciated, if we consider only superficially how many of its intellectual leaders have come from their ranks, or if we compare what percentage they furnish to the learned professions. These 'pastors' children' in a Protestant population cannot be balanced by the Catholic clergy in spite of equal intellectual attainments and perhaps—because undivided—greater devotion to their office. It is not necessary to remind the readers of this book of our own American history where similar observations can be made."

The minister's home is usually a home of intelligence and refinement without ease and luxury which sap the foundations of character. His home is an answer to a wise man's prayer, "Give me neither riches nor poverty." He never gets riches, sometimes he gets poverty, but more often the lines fall unto him in the pleasant places which lie between those two extremes. However limited, the library of the minister's son will have those few books which have been the inevitable companions of genius and attainment—Plutarch's Lives, Pilgrim's Progress, Æsop's Fables and the Bible. The son of the minister lives in an atmosphere of moral earnestness, intellectual activity and sacrifice and service for that which is highest.

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If any home ought to send forth a goodly line of stalwart sons, it is the home of the minister.

Oliver Goldsmith, himself a minister's son, opens the "Vicar of Wakefield" with these words: "I was ever of opinion that the honest man who married, and brought up a large family, did more service than he who continued single and only talked of population; from this motive I had scarcely taken orders a year before I chose my wife as she did her wedding gown, not for a fine glossy face, but for such qualities as would wear well."

With such serious purpose and intent the founders of clerical households have exalted religion and adorned society. Goethe, when a young man, fell in love with Frederike Brion, the attractive daughter of the pastor of Sessenhiem. It was the purest and strongest love of his passionate career, and his intimate knowledge of the life of that clerical household led him to write: "A Protestant country pastor is perhaps the most beautiful topic for a modern idyl; he appears like Melchizedek, a priest and king in one person. He is usually associated by occupation and outward condition with the most innocent conceivable estate on earth, that of the farmer; he is father, master of his house, and thoroughly identified with his

congregation. On this pure, beautiful, earthly foundation rests his higher vocation; to introduce men into life, to care for their spiritual education, to bless, to instruct, to strengthen, to comfort them in all the epochs of life, and, if the comfort for the present is not sufficient, to cheer them with the assured hope of a more happy future." "The one idyl of modern life," Coleridge termed the ministerial family life, and Wordsworth thought it worthy of praise in his "Ecclesiastical Sonnets," where he sings:

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"A genial hearth, a hospitable board,
And a refined rusticity, belong
To the neat mansion, where, his flock among,
The learned pastor dwells, their watchful Lord."

In 1750 Justus Moser calculated that in the two centuries after the Reformation, more than ten millions of human beings in all lands owed their existence to the clerical family. In the century and a half since he made his estimate the number have very likely trebled. And what influence have these millions of ministers' children exerted upon civilization? To judge of this a brief study of eminent names in Protestant countries is most illuminating.

In the "Dictionary of National Biography," England, there are 1,270 names of eminent men

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who were sons of clergymen. There are 510 names of famous men who were sons of lawyers, and 350 who were sons of physicians. In this single compilation of great names in English history, there are 410 more sons of ministers than sons of doctors and lawyers together. In a recent issue of "Who's Who," for America, out of nearly 12,000 names, almost 1,000 are sons of clergymen, a number out of all proportion to the whole number of ministers in the population of the country. According to that standard, there should have been not more than fifty of these famous men the sons of clergymen.

Time would fail to tell of all the notable men in all departments of human activity who were sons of ministers. We mention only a few of these. In science, Agassiz, Fabricius, Jenner, Linnaeus, Olbers, Fields, Morse, Berzelius, Euler; in history and philosophy, George John Romannes, John G. Wilkinson, Hallam, Hobbes, Froude, Sloane, Parkman, Bancroft, Schnelling, Schliermacher, Nietzsche, Muller; in art, Reynolds and Christopher Wren; in philanthropy, Clarkson and Granville Sharp, the anti-slavery agitators, and Cecil Rhodes; in poetry, Lessing, Tennyson, Ben Jonson, Cowper, Goldsmith, Thomson,

Coleridge, Addison, Young, John Keble, Matthew Arnold; among essayists, Emerson, Richter, Hazlitt; among novelists, Charles Kingsley, Henry James. But most remarkable is the long list of celebrated divines who were themselves sons of ministers. Among such are these names: Swedenborg, the seer, Jonathan Edwards, Archibald Hodge, Henry Ward Beecher, Lyman Abbott, Charles Spurgeon, Increase and Cotton Mather, Matthew Henry, the famous commentator, Frederick D. Maurice, Reginald Campbell, Lightfoot, John and Charles Wesley, Mansell, Dorner and Dean Stanley, or in making mention of the sons of ministers who have risen to high place, let us not forget their sisters, most of them unknown to fame, but who cheered, encouraged and inspired. A few of them are, however, themselves among the immortals: Charlotte Bronte, Jane Austen, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Francis Havergal, Anne Steel and Mary Wooley. Seven of the mistresses of the White House have been the daughters of clergymen; Abigail Adams, wife of one President and mother of another, Abigail Fillmore, Jane Appleton Pierce, daughter of President Appleton, of Bowdoin College, and the death of whose son in a railway accident before the

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mother's eyes, a short time previous to the inauguration of her husband, clouded with sorrow his term of office; Mrs. McElroy, sister of President Arthur; Elizabeth Cleveland, sister of Grover Cleveland; Caroline Scott Harrison, daughter of Dr. John W. Scott, and Helen Axson Wilson.

In our American history the Field family is a noble example of the influence of clerical households. The father, the Rev. David D. Field, was a minister of the Congregational Church. One son, David Dudley, was the eminent jurist and law reformer; another, Stephen J., was an associate justice of the Supreme Court; a third son, Henry M., was a useful clergyman and author; and the fourth son was Cyrus W., who laid the Atlantic cable.

One of the most remarkable of clerical families is that of the Woodbridges. The Rev. John Woodbridge, 1493, was a follower of Wyclif. His line can be traced through nine successive generations, and every generation but one has its representative in the ministry.

I have taken the pains to communicate with some of our Presbyterian Seminaries to ascertain the proportion of students for the ministry who are themselves sons of ministers. In the

Presbyterian Church, South, out of a list kept of 868 candidates for the ministry, 415 were sons of farmers, 84 sons of merchants, 27 sons of laborers, 17 sons of lawyers, 12 sons of physicians, and 120 sons of ministers. Thus 13 per cent. were sons of ministers. In the Western Theological Seminary, out of 74 students enrolled, nine are sons of ministers, or 12 per cent.; at the German Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, out of 16 enrolled, two, or 12 per cent.; at Union Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, out of 92 enrolled, 13 sons of ministers, or 14 per cent.; at the San Francisco Seminary, San Anselmo, California, out of 42 enrolled, five are sons of ministers, or 11 per cent.; at McCormick Seminary, 12 per cent.; Kentucky Theological Seminary, one in sixteen; at Princeton, out of 193 enrolled, 36, or 19 per cent.; at Union Seminary, New York, 40 out of 120, or 33 1-3 per cent. It is safe to say that the percentage of students for the ministry who are themselves sons of clergymen is much lower than in earlier days when only a few professions were open to men of education. Nevertheless, the manse is still doing more than its share to send men into the ministry. I heard recently of a father who boasted that no son of his should ever follow

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him into the ministry. God pity the Church if the day should ever come when that minister should be representative of the whole ministry, for a ministry that, because of hard knocks in the Master's service, dare not repeat to its own children the challenge of the Church and cannot live before them the godly life has lost its vision and is anointing itself for the day of burial. Over its portals is written that symbol of quenched light and departed fires, "Ichabod!"

On the bloody fields of Europe the minister's son has played a heroic part. Some of the most eminent ministers of Great Britain have lost sons in the war. Among them are Alexander Whyte, James Stalker, George Adam Smith, John A. Hutton and F. B. Meyer. The minister's home has never shrunk from that "last full measure of devotion" for which, alas! our world has called so often.

Many of the moderators of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church have been sons of ministers. John Witherspoon, president of Princeton, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and the first moderator of the General Assembly in 1789. Among others have been Robert Smith, 1790; Samuel Stanhope Smith, 1799; president of Princeton, John

Blair Smith, president of Union College, 1798; Robert Davidson, president of Transylvania University, 1796; William Mackay Tennent, 1797; J. B. Romeyn, 1810; Obadiah Jennings, 1822; Ashabel Green, 1824; Ezra Stiles Ely, 1828; James Hoge, 1832. Robert J. Breckenridge, moderator in 1841, the same who presided at the Democratic convention which nominated Douglas at Baltimore in 1860, was not the son of a minister, but one of the four sons of Hon. John Breckenridge, of Kentucky, and was, as his brother after him, pastor of the Second Church of Baltimore. In 1845 he became President of Jefferson College at Cannonsburg. Another brother was William Lewis Breckenridge, president of Centre College, Kentucky. Of him it was written, "What men thought of him strengthened all our ministers, of every Church, in the confidence of the community." At the time of the Civil War, the family was divided, one Breckenridge being a distinguished general in the Southern army and another in the Union army. Following once more the list of moderators we find among the sons of ministers, Gardiner Spring, 1843; Edwin Humphrey, 1851; Aaron Leland, 1850; Zephaniah Moore Humphrey, 1879; William C. Young, 1892; William H. Roberts,

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stated clerk of the General Assembly; James Moffat, president of Washington and Jefferson College, who followed his father in the pastorate of the First Church, Wheeling, West Virginia; Henry Van Dyke, Ambassador to the Netherlands, son of a moderator of the Assembly and father of a minister, and Dr. J. Ross Stevenson, president of Princeton Theological Seminary. The most interesting family in the list of the moderators is that of the Smiths. The father was moderator in 1790; a son, Samuel Stanhope Smith, of Princeton College, in 1799; and a second son, John Blair Smith, of Union College, was moderator in 1798.

If space permitted, an interesting catalogue of the sons of missionaries could be compiled. A study of the missionary families shows that more of the children of missionaries follow in the work of their fathers than sons of ministers in the home lands. We might mention the Scudders, the Kellogs and the Labarees. When the torch which illuminated the dark mists of heathenism fell from the hands of that noble company of men who first carried the Gospel to foreign lands, it was lifted again by sons who were not unworthy of their apostolic sires.

It is probable that ministers' sons have exerted more influence in the United States than in any other country. Among teachers, lawyers, doctors, scientists, men of business, and in the Church, there are a great host who have been the sons of the manse. Of the more notable men in our history who were sons of ministers, we find in political life, Wilson, Hughes, Cleveland, Clay, Buchanan, Arthur, Quay, Morton, Beveridge, Whitman, Sulzer, and the lamented Dolliver, of Iowa; among jurists, Field and Brewer; among educators, Faunce, James, Carroll, Lounsbury, Stockton Axson, Giddings; in history and literature, Sloane, Parkman, Bancroft, Holmes, Emerson, Henry James, Lowell, Gilder, Van Dyke; in invention and science, Cyrus W. Field, Samuel F. Morse, Agassiz and Ottmar Mergenthaler, inventor of the linotype; in music, De Koven and Louise Homer; in the Church, Beecher, Alexander, Hodge, Abbott, Jonathan Edwards; in philosophy, James. In the Hall of Fame, fifty-one famous Americans are honored. Of these, ten are the children of ministers: Aggasiz, Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Clay, Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, Lowell, Morse, Bancroft, Holmes.

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The Protestant ministry is justified of her children. Like the fabled Pactolus of Syria, whose sands carried the wealth of Croesus, the ministerial family has flowed down the valleys of our national life weighted with the golden dust of achievement and renown. Nearly half a century ago there appeared in one of our leading scientific monthlies an article by one of the De Candolles, the famous Swiss botanists. His proposition was that European scientists of the first rank were as numerous among Roman Catholics as among Protestants, provided that from the Protestant group we eliminate the sons of clergymen. In any comparison of tables of distinction in science, letters, art, invention, statesmanship, the names of the sons of clergymen would have to be eliminated if the comparison were to be fair and not odious. That confession of De Candolle, that sons of ministers will excel in any group of workers, suggests an inquiry as to the reasons for the too plainly evident superiority of men who have been trained in the homes of ministers. Some attribute it to books. The late Judge Hornblower, whose father was at one time minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Paterson, N. J., where I had the honor to serve for nine years, once

wrote to me on this subject and said, "I know that in looking back on my boyhood, the hours spent by me in my father's library gave me a taste for reading which has never deserted me." A former Attorney-General of the United States, John W. Griggs, discussing this subject with me, said, "I assume one reason is that the minister always managed if possible to give his sons what is called a 'college education.' One hundred and fifty years ago, and even fifty years ago, that meant a great deal more than it means now. Another reason may have been that as clergymen do not usually possess enough wealth to allow their children to live in idleness, their sons had the spur of necessity, which, added to that element of self-respect and education rather above the ordinary, sent them ahead in the world faster and in proportion more numerous than others."

All the reasons hinted at above—a home with neither riches nor poverty, books to read, few but good, the spur of necessity in making a way in the world, the old-fashioned college education—undoubtedly have played their part in the remarkable careers of ministers' sons. But the chief thing I think has been left unmentioned: that is, the Christian training of the home. I recall now having once seen a

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play by Ibsen, "The House of Rosmersholm," the prevailing idea being the inability of a man to do wrong and live happily in his wrong when he had back of him the admonition and the example of a good and noble house. Hands out of the past stretched forth to keep that man from enjoying the vineyard of evil. In a like sense, I imagine that men are subject, more than we can exactly estimate, to the influences of the past. I once knew a minister's son at college who went into a saloon and stepped up to the bar with his fellow-students and called for a drink, but just as he was lifting the glass to his lips, the thought flashed across his mind, "What if father saw me here!" That thought put an end to his saloon experiences. Men do not easily and naturally develop into pure and noble characters; it is done by striving, by prayer, by vigilance, and in the building up of this house of the soul, who shall weigh the influence or measure the assistance that comes from the memory of a father who walked before God and proclaimed his truth to the people?





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